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Weakening the Belief in General War: Schelling on Strikes

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WEAKENING THE BELIEF IN GENERAL WAR

Schelling on Strikes

By NATHAN LEITES

Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1966, 293 pp. \$7.50.

WE may argue about the wisdom of announcing 'unconditional surrender' as an aim in the last major war," observes Schelling in his recent book, *Arms and Influence*—as one might expect, a brilliant and important study¹—"but seem to expect 'unconditional destruction' as a matter of course in another one" (p. 23). Secretary McNamara does in fact require "adequacy of our forces from the standpoint of convincing others that the initiation of general nuclear war would inevitably bring about" not their facing the choice between capitulation and devastation, but exclusively "their own destruction."² Suppose the enemy underestimates our force and its defenses or exaggerates the obstacles he can put in our path—suppose, that is, we have failed to be "clear and convincing" about our capabilities.³ Assume that the enemy then attempts to disarm us, disarming himself in the act. He fails; that is, contrary to his presumptions, we do possess a capability for "Assured Destruction" (AD). What do we then do? We proceed to an "Assured Destruction attack," of course. Such a resolve is often implicitly conveyed in discussions by knowledgeable people, and is sometimes expressed. Thus massive retaliation, in the strict meaning of this discredited phrase, lives on: deterrence seems strengthened when one's AD capability is publicly allocated to an immediate and single AD attack. One of the authors writing on prenuclear affairs whom Schelling uses to novel and telling effect recounts the following incident about the Western outlaw, Starr, and his pursuer, Wilson: "Starr . . . offered Wilson the first shot, saying: 'If you miss and I kill you, it will be in self-defense.' Wilson fired and missed, and Starr killed him."⁴ We are prepared to repeat this sequence, even if our Wilson also disposes of only one bullet.

¹ I shall deal with only one of the several major contributions made by Schelling, that concerning the coercive use of nuclear weapons.

² Statement before the House Armed Services Committee, February 18, 1965, 42.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴ Paul I. Wellman, *A Dynasty of Western Outlaws* (Garden City 1961), 255.

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Still, this stance of ours is not an assured one. According to the Secretary of Defense, the aggressor's death follows "inevitably" from his deed; yet it is hard to find indications of the nature of this allegedly indissoluble link. Surely it is a matter of the victim's choice. We are, of course, accustomed to discussions of "things" that "get out of hand," "out of control"; but this is just shorthand for an interaction between opponents that—whether still based on calculations of cost and benefit, or throwing off that shackle—makes them proceed to decisions they had neither foreseen nor approved a bit earlier.

If one proceeds by one's own choice to "destroy the aggressor as a viable society,"⁵ what objective might one be pursuing?

In the current sensibility of Western analysts and rulers alike, one aim, once deterrence has failed, appears paramount, so much so that the Secretary has singled it out for extreme abbreviation, along with AD: Damage Limitation, or DL. (One may add to it, or include within it, the obvious orientation toward securing an end to the war on acceptable conditions, the successor to "victory.")

Now how is DL served by an AD attack in the situation sketched above? It is hard to see that it would be. To destroy the aggressor may be justified as the only effective means for protecting the next generation against a recurrence of attack; but, since the presumably successful shelving of Morgenthau in favor of Erhard after the last war, this has ceased to be a persuasive rationale. Some moral systems may require that the aggressor's country be destroyed as the only adequate punishment for his extreme deed, but not the prevailing Western sensibility in the era of Vatican II, with older devils and hells in rapid decline and with "retaliation," in the DOD's language, becoming a synonym of "response." Vengeance and rage no longer seem adequate motives for actions on the scale considered here. Of course, an Assured Destruction attack could, if one imagines the Establishment to be dominated by characters like those in *Dr. Strangelove*, literally be what some critics of nonrestraint are in the habit of calling an "orgy" of destruction.

As massive city-killing cannot easily be derived from the objectives of limiting damage and ending the war on acceptable conditions, while these are the only aims that command unbroken assent, and as the vision of "holocaust" appears difficult to discard (for reasons on which I shall not speculate here), such an attack must be presented with little or dubious justification.

Whatever the cost-effectiveness of "strategic bombing" during the last war, we were being sensible, even when mistaken, to expect benefits

⁵ McNamara, 38.

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from campaigns directed against the enemy's production and morale. This same expectation now lends a certain, though perhaps decreasing, aspect of continued usefulness to being as quick as we can in city-killing in nuclear war, even though we may now recognize that the role of production for a war once started is close to zero, and that a Leipzig should survive so as to be properly impressed by the fate of a Dresden. But it was precisely the years immediately preceding the appearance of nuclear weapons that saw the diffusion of the belief, often unformulated, according to which, even when we hold to modest objectives, there cannot be too much damage inflicted on the enemy's value as long as the war is on—that is, as long as he inflicts damage on us and threatens more. (If we in the West want to destroy a present-day Carthage, it has to be done as a “normal” military operation within a war, after which the target risks reemerging with its destroyer's help.)

To this preatomic heritage we may add the legacy of the first nuclear decade, when it seemed evident that if any of the new weapons were employed, they were bound to be used in “all-out” fashion, and when targeting them on their counterparts was still a fancy idea of a few specialists. “Automatically”—the mysteries of the new technology facilitated the denial of one's responsibility in choosing—nuclear war would be “general.”

You might have to use your weapons so as not to lose them. (Wasn't it, isn't it outlandish to consider whether certain kinds of use are really preferable to loss?) Even if you think of your opponent's forces as a desirable target, they may not be a feasible one, in which case you will have to hit his value. “If we were at a shooting gallery, had paid our fee and picked up the rifle and could shoot either the clay pipes or the sitting ducks,” Schelling explains, “‘shoot the pipes’ would mean the same as ‘don't shoot the ducks.’” And so hard is it for us to use our minds effectively in this domain that it has remained for the recent work of this eminent analyst to let us perceive further consequences of the capital and obvious point that “we are not talking about a shooting gallery” (p. 193).

There are yet more factors contributing to the survival of “massive retaliation.” If threatening an instant and total obliteration of the aggressor's cities enhances deterrence, is it not “inevitable” that this posture will lead to the threat's being made good if deterrence fails? As this point, too, is usually not elaborated, it is hard to say how much a belief in the lack of nuclear flexibility and to what extent the concern for maintaining “credibility” for the next bout of deterrence enter here.

Finally, if the enemy has already struck our cities, does it not stand

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to reason—which in part may represent unsure morality—that we will not (should not) spare his? The penchant for envisaging the destruction of our enemy's society—after proper provocation, to be sure—is thus buttressed by the disposition (nourished by that very penchant, of course) to consider his attack on our cities. “In the Soviet first strike case,” explains the Secretary with regard to a table showing the consequences of several U.S. postures, “we assumed that the Soviets initiate nuclear war . . . with the weight of their attack directed at our cities.”⁶

Why the enemy would do this is almost never indicated. It is exceptional for the Secretary to mention even in a general way that the “potential utility” of certain U.S. efforts with regard to “a nuclear exchange” would be “critically dependent” on, among other things, “the Soviet objective in such an exchange.”⁷ It might, of course, be recalled that all the Secretary is concerned with here is providing for such a “worst case,” rather than elucidating its origins. In this vein, he indicates that “damage-limiting programs could range across the entire spectrum, from one designed against a threat of a minor nuclear power . . . to one designed against the threat of a . . . first strike by the Soviet Union on our urban-industrial areas.”⁸ Still, it might be worth mentioning that while the motive for the opponent's disarming attack (for which we provide by AD) is easy enough to fathom, the state of mind behind his directing “the weight of his attack” in a first strike, or for that matter in any very large strike, “at our cities” is hard to construe.

But such a state of mind is easy to assume, as long as no indication of motives is required. Is the massive and simultaneous obliteration of cities with nuclear weapons not much more feasible than the destruction of the opposing force? Have modern wars not tended to be all-out? As the level of the enemy's “full damage potential” is indeed a crucial characteristic of the situation we are in, is it not natural to assume that this potential will be delivered in a single strike, in a “well-coordinated attack to maximize fatalities”?⁹

Much of this argument also applies to the last strike. Given our own propensity to imagine ourselves conducting an AD attack once disarming (of us by them) has failed, we tend to assume that after *our* counterforce strike (here decency in public speech, and perhaps also the exercise of reason, make for an asymmetry: we do not target cities to start with) their remaining devastation potential will be delivered upon us right away, as if no other employment would then seem more attrac-

⁶ Statement before the Senate Subcommittee on Department of Defense appropriations, 1966, 53.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

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tive, making the probable value of terminal devastation sink below the ultimate capability to kill value.

That other employment is, of course, the one with which Schelling's analysis is so largely and so lucidly concerned: "coercion" by threats or inflictions of "violence"; "bargaining." This use, if its dominance be accepted, would make one but little interested in the capacity to render actual, all at once, one's devastation potential. (One may not even much care to threaten talion for an opponent's foolish allegation that he will so use *his*.) It would rather make one concerned with the capacity to fraction this potential through time, with strikes now serving only as means for influencing forecasts (about strikes). For 1965-1966's "Assured Destruction," let us write "Assured Coercion" in 1967 and beyond.

And let us take leave of the term "general war." One of its major connotations seems to be the hidden proposition that nuclear wars with either very low or very high total yields exploded are very much more likely to occur than are exchanges in the intermediate range—a contention whose explicit formulation directs attention to the lack of evidence for it. Another connotation of "general war" appears to be the more obviously present belief that an all-out use—a rapid expenditure—of one's force is a major contingency for a major nuclear power in an exchange with another member of its class; and that belief is dubious. I have in the preceding pages recalled the reasons against all-out counterforce strikes; it is easy enough to add that all-out counterforce strikes—disarming attacks—have also become difficult to construe between major nuclear powers—this time, of course, for reasons not of motive but of opportunity.

If, then, nuclear weapons are going to be used between powers of the top class, the salvos are apt to be limited with regard to the forces involved—though, of course, through time, expenditures may produce a depletion of arsenals similar to that which would be quickly reached (by definition) in all-out conduct.

The Secretary seems to overstate a point when he affirms that the possession of AD is sufficient "to deter deliberate nuclear attack" on its possessor.¹⁰ If I render myself undisarmable (which is what AD means), and if I convince my opponent that I have done so, I do indeed "deter" (by definition) his "deliberate" and full (self-disarming) attempt to disarm me, nothing more (not that this is not a lot already). Disregarding the unlikely case of our enemy's disarming himself in impairing our value (leaving his value at the mercy of our undamaged force), other and smaller attacks will be reliably deterred only by possessing

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

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more than AD, something for which no abbreviation is offered in the Secretary's exposition (partly because the posture in question appears unfeasible, but also because that very fact, though admitted, does not seem worth stressing): the capacity to deprive the opponent of *his* AD, to disarm him, precisely because he will not already have done so himself in the smaller attacks here considered.

Such smaller attacks may aim at changing the relationship of nuclear forces to the attacker's advantage, a move that requires (if realities be correctly perceived) not only ratios of exchange of force favorable to the attacker, but also a sufficient expectation of gain in future exchanges of strikes or threats with an enemy who has not been disarmed—a matter that still awaits even initial exploration.

And then there is the whole range of possible attacks that aim at modifying the opponent's conduct by influencing his forecasts about what will, or will not, befall him, in case, on one hand, he persists in behavior unwanted by the attacker or in case, on the other hand, he chooses to act in ways demanded by that attacker: "coercive" attacks, of which those threatening or reducing the target's value form a major class, and the one to which Schelling addresses himself in particular.

In so doing, he discovers the pertinence in nuclear war—and, strangely and obviously, the *relative* humanity—of the equivalent of the practice (attributed, for instance, to the Binh Xuyen in not-so-old Vietnam) of sending a reluctant family bits of flesh supposedly taken from a kidnapped relative. In nuclear war, these would be bits of the opponent's urban-industrial sector, "taken out" so as to make him desist from doing the same to us (and in this sense, reassuring him about his value) or so as to make him accept our conditions for ending the war (and then frightening him about his value in case of noncompliance)—two policies that may not always be compatible, a problem that I hope Schelling will consider in future elaborations of his present analysis.

As the reliability of warning systems, their speed, the intelligence they furnish about characteristics of approaching attacks, and their survivability all increase, the case for having a force that can ride out an attack rather than having to be launched on warning would seem to be weakened—were it not for the probable primacy of coercive strikes, for coercion entails withholding. Replacing "destroying" by "coercing," which is Schelling's insight and emphasis, will leave few aspects of posture, or analysis, untouched.

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